The impact of differing maternal expectations on the academic achievements of primary school children in Urban Bangalore, South: a comparison between boys and girls

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Education of girls in India lags behind that of boys and several communities in India fare worse than others. Because of their secondary status in the society, Indian girls tend to suffer from low self-esteem. Thus, it is necessary to study the reasons why girls are being discouraged from attending and completing school as well as what are the expectations mothers have from them when compared to their male siblings. Data was collected using structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with the participants. Of 15 mothers, 12 completed the questionnaires; of these, five mothers were interviewed, and their data was used to present the findings of a comparative study on the maternal expectations on academic achievements in primary school children residing in Urban Bangalore, South. This study also throws light on some of the peripheral issues that emerge while considering maternal expectations on academic outcomes. The study examines how maternal expectations might differ in the case of boys versus girls.
within an Indian context, particularly within an urban setting in Bangalore, Karnataka. No differences were seen in the expectations mothers had of their sons compared to their daughters, but several other issues emerged. The results of this study may not be used conclusively as this is just a small-scale research project and hence no generalisation can be made to address such prevalent cultural issues in India, particularly in Urban South Bangalore, Karnataka, South India. The results of this study illustrate the need for more literature within the Indian context.

Key words: gender, girl’s education, India.

Research suggests that educational opportunities for girls in India lag behind those for boys (Aggarwal, 1987), and that several communities fare worse than others in this regard. Because of their secondary status in society, Indian girls tend to suffer from low self-esteem (Singh et al., 2009). It is therefore appropriate to study the reasons why girls are discouraged from attending and completing school, as well as their mothers’ expectations compared to those in relation to their male siblings.

The small-scale study discussed in this article was conducted in a district of urban Bangalore to investigate the impact of differing maternal expectations on the academic achievements of primary school children. The researcher investigated how maternal expectations differed in respect of boys and girls within an Indian context. It is important to recognise that in India, though gender bias has been explored and understood, there is a lack of available literature which discusses the reasons for the persistence of this phenomena. This is an issue that allegedly affects a large portion of the Indian population, but research studies in India have not investigated the extent and prevalence of this problem. This suggested to the researcher, who is a woman, that this matter was worthy of more detailed investigation.

According to Banerjee (2011), research findings have indicated that patriarchal societies such as India’s place minimal importance on girls’ education. She also stressed crucial factors of gender disparity such as the frequency with which girls from lower economic strata drop out of school at an early age to take care of their
siblings and help their parents in regular household work. Although gender disparity exists at various levels in India, this study focuses specifically on education because of its importance in enabling girls to gain independence and positions of respect in society. In emphasising this importance, the researcher intends to highlight the fact that Indian women should be empowered and accepted as independent entities living with dignity (Banerjee, 2011). As Aggarwal (1987) has stated, the education of girls has always fallen behind that of boys, though this may vary across Indian regions and states. In support of this suggestion, Husain and Sarkar (2010) found on average lower gender disparity in southern states across educational levels. Bandopadhyay and Subrahmanian (2010) pointed out that several Indian communities invest minimally in female education as compared to their male counterparts. They also demonstrated that one of the reasons for underinvestment in female education was that women are identified solely with household and reproductive responsibilities as well as domestic socialisation, which do not require many years of schooling. This furthered the researcher’s interest in this area and emphasised the importance of the focus on maternal expectations. When considering these expectations in relation to academic achievements of boys as opposed to girls, Indian communities commonly see a lot of pressure from mothers, pushing their children to perform more in the early years of schooling. In India, parents pressurise their children from the primary school years to strive for better performance. Mothers seem to have more control of the academic performance of their children as compared to fathers. The motivation for this study is to determine the degree to which girls are encouraged to complete school as compared to their male siblings in urban South Bangalore (a metropolitan city), as well as to determine whether maternal expectations differ between boys and girls.

There are several subtleties to gender discrimination which need to be examined more closely. Drawing attention toward this, the researcher must emphasise that women are not and have not been considered successful in their professional lives if they have been unsuccessful in managing the domestic front. This area was of interest to the researcher for two reasons: first, it is an underresearched issue in India; second, a number of educated families in urban Bangalore still follow the old view that girls are meant to manage domestic responsibilities and not attend school. The lack of Indian literature discussing this issue is problematic and, while the writer was compelled to access literature from other countries which examines gender disparity in education, she recognises that there are difficulties with immediate transfer of ideas across cultures and legislations and has endeavoured to take account of this throughout the study.
While the primary purpose of the research was to gather data in order to discuss this controversial area, the researcher also aimed to raise awareness and provoke debates on this issue within the Indian context. The majority of the studies conducted in India on the girl child’s education have been based on impoverished backgrounds, and hence the researcher decided to investigate the cause and effect of gender bias and women’s education in educated families. While assumptions have often been made that this is largely an issue within poorer socio-economic groups, evidence from communities within Bangalore suggests that this is far from the truth.

Very similar to India is the case of rural China, as demonstrated by Zhang et al. (2007), who state that mothers remain at home taking care of the family while the father is away at work. They also draw attention to the fact that mothers’ aspirations in terms of education may impact upon school persistence, as well as socialising the child into respective gender roles. Thus, it can be concluded that mothers could be the right choice for this study, as they provide the emotional support and discipline that a child regularly needs. It was also demonstrated by Chow and Chu (2007) that fathers’ educational levels mattered far less to their children’s academic achievements when compared to that of their mothers. This theory can be extended to the Indian scenario too, for better understanding.

Though the researcher has raised concerns only about education and maternal expectations, in India gender has several overlapping issues, such as the preference for boys over girls, parental aspirations and expectations of boys to achieve better results, training girls to fit into domestic roles and the relationships between siblings of opposite genders. All these will be discussed briefly, with the emphasis being on maternal expectations regarding academic achievements in primary school children, providing a comparison between boys and girls.

From the outset it is important that the researcher highlights the meaning of academic expectations. ‘Academic expectations can be defined as the knowledge attained and skills developed in school subjects’ (Parveen et al., 2013). In terms of personal progress, academic performance has become the key factor. Parents’ sole ambition seems to be to see their children climb the ladder of success to the highest possible rung. In a largely patriarchal society like India, the least importance is placed on educating the girl child. There are several reasons for this, including orthodox dogmatic ideas and preferring males to be the assets/heirs of the future. Several developed and developing countries have acknowledged the importance of girls’ education (Lewis and Lockheed, 2007). However, in certain
developing regions such as India, Latin America and southeast Asia, the education of girls lags behind that of boys, by reason of the interaction between gender and culture. Girls belonging to marginalised groups in these regions suffer greatly in terms of education when compared to the mainstream population as well as to boys within their own linguistic groups (Lewis and Lockheed, 2007). In India, women are discriminated against in many aspects of life – not only in education, but also in employment opportunities and the distribution of social responsibilities. Gender inequality in the field of education is extreme, the best example of this being the fact that while in India most of the teachers in the schools are women, females continue to be less likely to gain access to school, to continue education beyond the school years or to achieve beyond basic levels in education (Right to Education Project, 2008). Cultural and traditional values become a barrier to women’s education in India. The fear that if women are educated, they will begin to challenge some of the societal inequalities and concerns, condemns millions of girls to a life without education. Unfortunately, due to a lack of limited data as well as definitive measures, interactions of gender and culture, as well as the issues surrounding education of girls and their exclusion, have only been recognised, but not addressed (Lewis and Lockheed, 2007).

It is generally accepted that education is pivotal to everybody’s development and welfare, but unfortunately, ours being a male-dominated society, women are not encouraged to study. Educating a woman basically means educating the entire family, thus equipping her for various roles such as mother, wife, sister, nation-builder and contributor to the family income (Sonowal, 2013). It is important to understand that women who have had a pleasant childhood and supportive parents do not want their daughters to achieve extraordinary results in academia as that would be a hindrance to their domestic lives in the future. Croll (2006, p. 1286) illustrated how, according to reports by UNESCO, girlhood was described as

‘a time when girls begin to deny themselves and expect little of themselves and consider themselves less than their brothers. This was a lesson they will pass on to their daughters unless this vicious cycle was broken’.

Urbanisation has to a certain extent fostered a change in attitudes toward empowerment and the education of women (Mukherjee, 2013) In India, like many Asian countries, the mother is usually the primary care-giver and nurturer. Her satisfaction with her children’s performance in school has a direct impact on the children’s perception of their self-competence. Since mothers play a pivotal role in a child’s life, the researcher focused the attention of her work entirely upon
maternal expectations. Reinforcement of the importance of this focus is provided by the study conducted by McGrath and Repetti (2005) in which they concluded that fathers’ satisfaction was related only to their sons’ self-perceptions, whereas mothers’ satisfaction impacted both boys’ and girls’ competence.

In their study, McGrath and Repetti (2000) also found that a mother’s overall satisfaction with her children’s academic performance impacted upon the children’s belief about their academic performance. They also argued that in some cases mothers and fathers were more satisfied with their daughters’ performances compared to their sons’. Could this mean that parents set lower expectations for their daughters? Evidence is yet to be collected to determine whether maternal expectations of academic performance across genders in primary school will actually be able to predict academic performance of children in high school. Additionally, children find it difficult to judge themselves based solely on their academic performance at school. They inevitably take feedback from their parents, especially their mothers. Unfortunately, in India, parents set unreasonably high standards for their children in academic subjects without understanding their true potential and proficiencies. This could lower their academic outcomes and self-esteem as well as their interest in academic schooling.

In the researcher’s opinion, educated women have a visceral need to send their daughters to school in opposition to the feelings of their husbands. Being educated, in this context, refers to having acquired a degree of school completion (10+2). In India, secondary school consists of the eighth, ninth and tenth grades, whereas senior secondary includes the 11th and 12th grade in all states of India. Hence, it is mandatory to have completed 12 years of schooling before enrolling in either professional or vocational courses. It will be seen later on in this study that occasionally, education has no role to play in the discouragement of women’s roles in society. In spite of education, women are made to fit the domestic role by default. With all its promises, India has failed to provide universalisation of education, as it remains under the stranglehold of major stratifications that lead to discrimination (Banerjee, 2011). Hence, looking at the literature, it can be seen that the education of girls in Asian countries, including India, is a matter of concern.

The researcher has investigated possible reasons for this and, based on the research findings, draws a conclusion about this issue in urban South Bangalore. Along with investigating maternal expectations in academic achievement, the
researcher has taken this research as an opportunity to understand the questions: what are mothers’ perceived roles of girls, and why?

Sample and methodology

The sample for this study was 15 mothers, from a range of situations, located in various parts of the city. The main criteria for including these 15 mothers in this study was that they should have one boy and one girl child, with at least one child attending primary school. The researcher believes that in India, preferentialism in gender exists across all communities and cultures, and hence the researcher gave out questionnaires and conducted interviews in a small group but across diverse cultures. The researcher has come across young girls (as young as eight years) who already believe and accept the existence of gender stereotypes in our Indian society.

Consent was obtained from the head of the institution for the acquisition of mothers’ responses (Winterbottom et al., 2008) as well as from the individual mothers. The reasons behind choosing these women particularly were: a) they had a graduate-level qualification (since the researcher is looking at educated mothers); b) their accessibility. Unfortunately 3 of the 15 mothers did not return the consent forms and questionnaires. This study was conducted over a brief period of approximately three months, during which identified participants were given the questionnaires and, after they responded, willing participants were also interviewed. Though this was small-scale research, it was extended over three months because of the mothers’ unavailability for interviews, as well as other constraints, which may in part have been associated with the controversial nature of the study area.

A structured questionnaire was designed and given to 15 participants, before which the participants were given an informed consent form through which the purpose of the study and their rights to confidentiality and participation in the study were explained (Chow and Chu, 2007). The questionnaire requested information about the family situations of the participants, their childhood experience and their expectations of their children in terms of academic performance. A clear description of the purpose of the study and its location was given while handing out the consent forms. The researcher also ensured she scrutinised and read available articles in order to select relevant questions, following which these were refined and
modified to suit the purpose of the researcher’s study (Eiselen et al., 2005). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five mothers based on their willingness and responses on completing the questionnaires. Questions were asked informally and the researcher probed the mothers’ responses in directions such as: how was their childhood? What was their relationship with their siblings? What were their parents’ expectations from them in terms of academic achievements? What were their own expectations from their children? The advantage of a semi-structured interview is that it helps to examine the amount of understanding a participant has about a topic, as well as obtaining reliable data. Permission was obtained from the participants to audio-tape them while conducting the interviews. However, this led to a definite amount of unease and apprehension, thus causing insufficient disclosure of information. It was essential for the researcher to consider the participants’ interest in this study; gender bias is a contested topic in India, and participants may not have felt comfortable participating in such a study and should not be coerced into doing so. While conducting fieldwork, the researcher had to ensure all aspects of privacy, anonymity and confidentiality, as well as the participants’ right to access the findings of the study in future if they desired. In other words, the participants were expected to trust the researcher and thus consent. In return, the researcher too expected the participants to divulge truthful details and not conceal information, as that would eventually hamper the quality and reliability of information obtained.

Unfortunately, there were tensions during most of the interviews conducted. Though the participants trusted the researcher, they seemed to be apprehensive about what they were revealing and its consequences. The researcher would like to highlight here that in this research she followed the British Educational Research Guidelines, which might give rise to certain dilemmas within the Indian context. One of the major challenges the researcher had anticipated was refusal to participate or to sign the informed consent form, while still being willing to be a part of the study. This research could give rise to certain sensitive ethical concerns based on culture, gender or socio-economic standing, and hence all possible ethical norms were followed. Especially while conducting interviews, respondents experienced some discomfort with questions and hence it was the researcher’s responsibility to make the participants feel at ease. This was done in a few interviews by suspending the meeting or by changing the topic for a time (BERA guidelines, 2011). The challenge at this stage was ensuring the emotional well-being of the participants, as certain discussions during the course of the interview led to disclosure of unexplored and traumatic episodes in the respondents’ life.
Discussion

The researcher’s conclusion drawn from the data obtained and the literature reviewed is that in urban Bangalore, mothers definitely have expectations of their children in terms of academic performance right from the primary level, but no clear distinction is made between a boy and a girl. However, as mentioned earlier, the data obtained is questionable. Over the past few decades there has been a significant change in laws, attitudes and status, as well as behaviour, in Indian society (Dhawan, 2005). However, according to the data obtained in this study, women still feel that any amount of encouragement in the field of academia does not change the perception that, once a girl is married, she eventually will have to don the role of primary care-giver. The education of women, their family roles and the delicate interaction of these two aspects of their lives has attracted a lot of attention in the past and continues to do so even today (Dhawan, 2005). Of the five women who were interviewed, two were working women who were very successful in striking a balance between their domestic and professional lives. However, they too felt slight dissatisfaction when they looked at their counterparts who are housewives, because that is where the overlap and spillover instances begin to reflect. One even expressed concern over the support they get from their male counterparts in balancing their domestic life. She feels that even if she encourages her daughter to achieve extraordinary academic results, her final role still lies within the confines of the house. Research over the past ten years has been indicative of the complex interaction between a woman’s objective and subjective roles, which in turn affect her identity in society (Phillips and Imhoff, 1997, cited in Dhawan, 2005). This conclusively does not indicate differentiating between the son and daughter, but being realistically prepared for the child’s future in Indian society. To this day, women are treated on a different level, being constantly deprived of their rights and at the same time being reminded of their duties. Though the roles of women are increasing day by day, in the present society their status has not improved considerably. The social roles of a middle-class woman are a contested topic even today. On a global level, and relatively speaking, the role of the man lies outside the house, as opposed to that of a woman, which lies in the home. And this starkly comes across as gender bias. In developing nations, these norms exclude women from society. This exclusion can either be externally imposed (ruling out women from employment or leadership posts) or internally imposed (where the woman considers the home her territory and does not like the man’s invasion; Mikkola and Miles, 2007).
This overlaps into the point which says our cultural nurturing compels us to assign domestic chores to girls and outdoor responsibilities to boys. As emphasised in a paper by Mikkola and Miles (2007), societal norms and familial expectations may exclude women from employment opportunities, and similarly men from the domestic sphere. My opinion in this case would be that possibly children have grown up seeing the roles their parents fit into, and have thus internalised the same. According to Roland (1988) and Roopnarine and Hossain (1992, cited in Roopnarine and Carter (1992), Asian Indian parents begin preparing children from their formative years for roles in adult life, in which, conventionally, the men live with their parents and take care of the entire family while the women support their spouse, caring for and nurturing the children and the household. In India, one of the major obstacles to achieving economic prosperity is gender difference in education (Khalid, 2008). So again, I come back to the question: why does gender bias exist? It is probably due to the fact that parents prefer to educate boys rather than girls as a result of the cultural norms in our country (Khalid, 2008). It has also been observed (in the same report by Khalid) that the education of parents has been found to be a strong determinant of children’s education. In this study, all the mothers chosen were required to have completed schooling/basic formal education. Hence the expectation from this study was that women would have strong preferences to send their daughters to school and, in order to achieve this, the household resources would have to be pooled and separated accordingly. This preference of women may or may not be supported by their husbands and their families. This overlaps with the point raised by one of the participants during the interview in respect of managing domestic and professional lives without much support from male counterparts, and the question of whether it is really worth sending girls to school and higher education when ultimately they have to shoulder the domestic responsibilities. This does not mean that India lacks women professionals. But in the population that the researcher studied, most of the women felt that however educated girls are, their domain is the house.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this research was to investigate whether differing maternal expectations between boys and girls have an impact on the academic achievements of primary school children in urban Bangalore. Cultural differences such as parenting style and influence play a huge role in academic achievements (Chao and Sue, 1996; Lin and Fu, 1990, cited in Chow and Chu, 2007). Very similar to Indians, Chinese parents begin to influence their children by focusing them very early in
life on their schoolwork (Chao and Sue, 1996; Chen, Lee and Stevenson, 1996, cited in Chow and Chu, 2007). A study conducted in one of the large cities of China revealed that in single-child families there was no gender discrimination in parental aspirations and spending on education (Tsui and Rich, 2002, cited in Zhang et al., 2007, p. 134). This could also prove to be a worthy point for future research in India – to see whether parents with only one child have similar expectations from their child in terms of education. It is common in India to observe that for boys, what matters more for their success in school is their family’s economic situation, whereas for girls, grades matter. Mothers holding extremely traditional values are the ones having gender aspirations and academic expectations. This could be because although they believe in the importance of educating their daughters, they are also concerned about their perception by society (Zhang et al., 2007). In this study focus was also given to mothers’ general beliefs regarding gender equality and the importance of girls’ education, as well as the importance of the woman’s role in the Indian society. It was pleasing to find that women are quite motivated to educate their daughters and help them carve a niche for themselves in society. But gradually, the soft voice of the traditional Indian woman spoke up when they said they wanted their daughters to be financially independent only in order to take care of themselves in case of a domestic crisis. This was substantiated by a study conducted by Harold and Eccles (1990), in which mothers had the opinion that if their daughters asserted too much independence, they would not have happy marriages. Even though they had aspirations for both their sons and daughters to have jobs that could support them and their families, they aspired more for their sons. Though all the participants here revealed having very pleasant childhood experiences, with no objections raised by their parents and their encouragement to participate in academic and co-curricular activities, the researcher had doubts about the authenticity of the information revealed. It also cannot be overlooked here that all the women considered for this study were educated and had fair knowledge about the scope of this research. The researcher strongly feels future research should be conducted to explore mothers’ attitudes, their educational attainment and how that impacts their expectations of their children.

References


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